

Michael Meadowcroft: a Green in denial

Whilst the main political parties are agonising over whether a ceasefire or a “humanitarian pause” is more appropriate for Gaza, a former MP for Leeds West has written that Hamas’s actions are a matter of “cause and effect”¹ in response to the treatment of the Palestinians by the Israeli government and the Israeli settlers. This political firebrand has been at it for half a century: he denounced ever war from the Falklands² to Kosovo³ to Iraq⁴ and advocated for a united Ireland²; he opposed private education⁵, Thatcher’s programme of privatisation⁶ and the more recent privatisation of Royal Mail⁷; he refused to carry any ID card that Blair or Brown wanted to introduce⁵; he advocated nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from NATO². This might sound much like Jeremy Corbyn to some readers, but the person who I have in mind is actually Michael Meadowcroft, who belongs to the Liberal Democrats. He is so committed to the ideology of liberalism that he briefly led a Liberal Party that refused to join with the Social Democrats in the merger that created the Liberal Democrats.

Why has Meadowcroft been part of a party that has seldom reflected his views in its national programme? The answer all comes down to philosophy. It is difficult to find any philosophers of liberalism in Britain in the last hundred years, yet Meadowcroft believes that a healthy democracy requires every political party to have a philosophical underpinning⁸. He believes that the arguments that liberalism are self-evidently superior to those for other ideologies and all that remains is for liberals to say these things.⁹

Given that so many of his political positions are shared with socialists, we must ask why Meadowcroft rejects socialism. Most members of the Labour Party do not spend much time philosophising over whether they believe in the common ownership of property, but Meadowcroft cannot make such compromises. He believes that it is no respect that socialism has led to coercive measures’ being taken by governments, and he is happy to agree with some conservatives in their critique of socialism’s utopianism.¹⁰ He is also a believer in bottom-up politics. In one of his less charitable

¹ <https://beemeadowcroft.uk/writing/current-affairs/foreign-affairs/cause-and-effect>

² http://digital.library.leeds.ac.uk/11500/145/LUA-PUB-002-LS-332_000.pdf

³ <https://www.beemeadowcroft.uk/writing/current-affairs/political-issues/means-and-ends>

⁴ <https://www.beemeadowcroft.uk/liberalism/intro>

⁵ https://beemeadowcroft.uk/images/pdf/focus_on_freedom.pdf

⁶ <https://www.beemeadowcroft.uk/writing/yorkshire-post-articles/2004/a-very-special-relationship>

⁷ <https://beemeadowcroft.uk/liberalism/liberal-articles/reinventing-the-state-social-liberalism-for-the-21st-century>

⁸ <https://www.beemeadowcroft.uk/writing/current-affairs/green-issues/letter-to-a-green-party-colleague>

⁹ https://beemeadowcroft.uk/images/pdf/towards_realignment.pdf

¹⁰ https://beemeadowcroft.uk/images/pdf/liberalism_and_the_left.pdf

comments, he described the Gipton estate in Leeds as a “dehumanised jungle”², which has resulted from uprooting long-established working-class communities and moving their residents to a planned estate with no soul. It is admirable in a way that a man has put such a high value on philosophy in an age when party leaders have pursued policies that bear no relation to their party’s official ethos.

Since Meadowcroft began his career, there has been a new entry to the landscape of political philosophy: environmentalism. One might expect him to agree with the emphasis on the environment over the economy, on working for peace and internationalism, and on rooting politics in communities. In fact, Meadowcroft has had some harsh words to say about the Green Party. He has called it “the party to end all parties”, fearing that it will not give up power once defeated in an election.⁷ This seems hard to justify when Green parties have been in power in Germany and Ireland, and have shown no sign of destroying the democratic process in those countries. Meadowcroft has even mocked the Green Party for their consideration of joining the Liberals during their infancy, but he never considers the reason why they decided not to do so.¹¹

I fear that this is a case of protesting too much: Meadowcroft has been so harsh on the Green Party because he fears that its philosophy suits his views better than liberalism. If the benefits of Meadowcroft’s variant of liberalism are so clear, then it begs the question why no leader of the Liberal Party or the Liberal Democrats has ever shared them. Liberal governments are not immune from tyranny. Every history student knows about the suffragette posters showing forced-feeding of suffragette prisoners with the slogan “Vote against the Liberal”. No Green government has ever done such a thing, yet Meadowcroft has found reasons to fear them more than the party of Asquith. Freedom has been claimed by everyone from Karl Marx to Ayn Rand: it cannot unite its fans under one political programme. It is understandable why Meadowcroft joined the Liberals as a young man, but the young Meadowcrofts of today would be happier in the Green Party. I believe that the MP for Leeds West from 1983-7 is a Green in denial.

¹¹ <https://beemeadowcroft.uk/liberalism/liberal-articles/reinventing-the-state-social-liberalism-for-the-21st-century>